

Hearing Aid-Compatibility for Telephone Equipment

FCC Consumer Facts

Background

The Hearing Aid Compatibility Act of 1988 (HAC Act) requires that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) ensure that **all** telephones manufactured or imported for use in the United States after August 1989, and all “essential” telephones, are hearing aid-compatible. “Essential” phones are defined as “coin-operated telephones, telephones provided for emergency use, and other telephones frequently needed for use by persons using such hearing aids.” These might include workplace telephones, telephones in confined settings (like hospitals and nursing homes), and telephones in hotel and motel rooms. Secure telephones, approved by the U.S. Government to transmit classified or sensitive conversations, and telephones used with public mobile and private radio services, are **exempt** from the HAC Act.

In 2003, the FCC set a timetable for the development and sale of digital wireless telephones that are compatible with hearing aids and cochlear implants, used by the hearing-impaired to improve hearing ability. This timetable increases the number of digital wireless telephones that are hearing aid-compatible. In June 2005, the FCC modified the preliminary handset deployment benchmarks specific to Tier I wireless carriers (i.e., nationwide wireless carriers such as Sprint-Nextel, Verizon Wireless, Cingular, and T-Mobile). The FCC did not modify the preliminary deployment benchmark obligations for handset manufacturers of Tier II or Tier III (i.e., non-nationwide) wireless carriers.

Hearing Aid-Compatibility for All Phones

Whether a phone is hearing aid-compatible depends on the date when manufacturers and wireless service providers are required to be in compliance with the Commission’s rules. For 2005, handsets are hearing aid-compatible if they are rated “U3 or M3”. For 2006, handsets are hearing aid-compatible if they are rated “U3T or M3T”. These ratings indicate the sound quality of the handset when used with a hearing aid and are established by the American National Standards Institute.

A telephone that is hearing aid-compatible has an internal feature that allows the use of telephone-compatible hearing aids. FCC rules require that phones subject to the HAC Act: (1) produce a magnetic field of sufficient strength and quality to permit coupling with hearing aids that contain telecoils; and (2) provide an adequate range of volume.

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Hearing Aid-Compatibility for All Phones (cont’d.)

A telecoil is a small, tightly-wrapped piece of wire that, when activated, picks up the voice signal from the electromagnetic field that leaks from compatible telephones. Users of telecoil-equipped hearing aids are able to communicate effectively over the telephone without feedback and without the amplification of unwanted background noise.

A volume control feature permits the user to adjust the level of sound emanating from the handset or headset receiver. It allows telephones to be used effectively by persons with hearing aids, and by other persons with a hearing impairment who do not use hearing aids.

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Rules on Hearing Aid-Compatibility for Digital Wireless Phones

Although analog wireless phones do not usually cause interference with hearing aids or cochlear implants, digital wireless phones sometimes do because of electromagnetic energy emitted by the phone's antenna, backlight, or other components. Therefore, the FCC set specific hearing aid-compatibility rules for digital wireless phones.

The rules are:

For **Tier I** digital wireless service providers:

- By September 16, 2005, each such provider had to make available to consumers, per air interface, **four ANSI U3 or M3**-rated handsets, or twenty-five percent of the total number of digital wireless handset models offered by the carrier nationwide. Each provider also had to make all of these models available for testing in each retail store it owned or operated.¹
- By September 16, 2006, each such provider must make available to consumers, per air interface, **five ANSI U3T or M3T**-rated digital wireless handsets, or twenty-five percent of the total number of handsets it offers nationwide. Each provider also must make all of these models available for testing in each retail store it owns or operates.

For **other** digital wireless service providers:

- By September 16, 2005, each such provider had to include in its handset offerings at least **two ANSI U3 or M3**-rated hearing aid-compatible handset models per air interface offered. Each provider also had to make all of these models available for testing in each retail store it owned or operated.

¹ T-Mobile had until November 16, 2005.

- By September 18, 2006, each such provider must include in its handset offerings at least **two ANSI U3T or M3T**-rated hearing-aid compatible handset models for each air interface offered. Each provider also must make all of these models available for testing in each retail store it owns or operates.

For **manufacturers** of digital wireless handsets for use or imported for use in the United States:

- By September 16, 2005, each such manufacturer had to offer to service providers at least **two ANSI U3 or M3**-rated hearing aid-compatible handset models for each air interface offered.
- By September 18, 2006, each such manufacturer must offer to service providers at least **two ANSI U3T or M3T**-rated hearing aid-compatible handset models for each air interface offered.

For **both** digital wireless service providers and manufacturers:

- By February 18, 2008, **fifty percent** of all handsets offered must meet the **ANSI U3 or M3** hearing aid-compatibility requirement for each air interface offered.

For additional information about the FCC's actions with regard to hearing aid-compatible wireless phones and other steps the Commission has taken to ensure that individuals with disabilities have access to telecommunications services, please go to www.fcc.gov/cgb/dro. You may also contact the FCC's Consumer Call Center at 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice or 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) TTY.

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For general information on other telecommunications-related issues, you may contact the FCC's Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau in the following ways:

Internet at www.fcc.gov/cgb

Consumer Center:
1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice
1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) TTY

Mail:
Federal Communications Commission
Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554.

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To receive information on this and other FCC consumer topics through the Commission's electronic subscriber service, click on <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/contacts/>.

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03/15/06*-cpb

